

Community Partnership Toolkit

Templates and resources to build partnerships with families and communities – a companion guide to the Oregon Department of Education's Community Engagement Toolkit

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Foreword

Make progress along the community engagement spectrum

To Northwest Oregon’s school communities:

We are pleased to present a collection of tools that can help cultivate the partnerships that exist in your school district and establish new ones. This is a companion guide to the [Oregon Department of Education’s Community Engagement Toolkit](#), which includes a spectrum of community engagement strategies. With this companion guide, it’s our hope that you and your team will be inspired to engage with your community in new and transformative ways.

The Student Success Act, and thus your Integrated Plan, aims to meet students’ mental and behavioral health needs and increase academic achievement for students who have historically experienced academic disparities. This vision relies fundamentally on authentic community engagement to reimagine an equitable, thriving school system.

This publication will walk you through the purpose-setting, planning, facilitation and data analysis stages of two high-leverage engagement strategies: empathy interviews and story circles. We have also enclosed additional tips for improving existing approaches and ideas for new strategies to try.

As you work to construct your Integrated Plan throughout the 2022-23 school year, you are afforded an exciting—perhaps also daunting—opportunity to rethink how you partner with students, families and other community members to design school programs that meet your communities’ unique needs. Some days it could feel messy and complex, and other days you will be invigorated by the stories that surface during empathy interviews, story circles and in other conversations.

Through it all, what’s most important is that you and your team share a genuine vision for connection, collaboration and partnership that extends beyond the walls of the classroom. Together, we can start to address the challenges brought on by systemic racism, poverty, COVID-19 and the hundreds of other ways we struggle to support the wholeness of

Purpose of this publication

- Acknowledge the complexity and messiness of community-driven design while providing simple, easy-to-follow next steps for deepening and strengthening your district’s community engagement strategies.
- Prepare conveners, facilitators and community liaisons in your district to lead authentic conversations that build trust, elevate innovative solutions, and attend to the well-being of your students and community, especially those who have been marginalized or traumatized by public systems.
- Guide the sense-making of complex qualitative data and seamlessly connect it to the construction of your Integrated Plan.

students, families, educators and others in our school communities. We look forward to supporting your success in this goal.

In partnership,

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Expanding Language Access

Strengthen connections with multicultural families

The way schools care about children is reflected in the way schools care about the children’s families.”

- Joyce L. Epstein, Ph.D.

Schools have a legal obligation to provide adequate language access. Engaging families in languages other than English is also a prerequisite to addressing the needs of certain focal student groups, like emerging bilingual students and students recently arrived.

Language is the basis for families, communities and schools to work together. Your school district should know which families require interpretation. When working with these families, follow these tips:

- **Research the cultural needs of families in your district while practicing cultural humility:** Learning about a family’s culture enhances your ability to foster a safe and welcoming environment. It will help you avoid miscommunication and cultural blunders. Seek out cultural knowledge, invest time to research, and practice self-awareness in order to navigate potential biases and mitigate power dynamics relating to language.



Interpretation: The oral transference of one language to another. Examples include face-to-face meetings, live events or using a language line for a phone call.

Consecutive interpretation: The speaker says a sentence or two, then pauses while the interpreter renders the same information in another language. This lengthens the conversation but ensures accuracy and the opportunity to clarify.

- **Select the appropriate style of interpretation and plan your engagement accordingly:** Your script, time allotment and technology requirements will vary depending on if you use consecutive or simultaneous interpretation. Give interpreters materials, such as scripts and facilitation guides, ahead of time. Meet with the interpreter a few minutes before the meeting to make introductions and set expectations together. If time permits, plan for a debrief with the interpreter after the meeting to give and receive constructive feedback.
- **Conduct interviews without interpretation, when possible:** Communicating through an interpreter can inhibit trust building and weight the power dynamic in the wrong direction. Ideally, the interviewer is proficient in reading, writing, listening and speaking the home/native language, and is aware of the families’ culture. Keep in mind that bilingual staff without formal training should not be responsible for facilitating interpreted communication and written translation between families and staff for interviews, meetings and events — only trained interpreters and translators should be interpreting and translating for families.

Simultaneous interpretation: The interpreter renders the speaker’s ideas in real time. Except for very short interpretations (1 hour max), it requires interpreters to work in pairs due to mental strain.

Translation: The written transference from one language to another. Examples include a document sent home in the preferred language, instructional materials in written form, etc. Allow time to translate source texts in advance of announcements and events so all families receive information at the same time. For presentations at bilingual events, each slide can display the source text on the left and translated text on the right. Be mindful of how much you fit on a slide.

- Google Translate can help someone navigate online materials or respond in emergencies. It does not replace translation services. Have a qualified translator review the translation.

Section 1:

Empathy Interviews



Why and When to Use This Strategy

Make meaningful progress toward your Integrated Plan

The purpose of empathy interviews

Interviews can serve as a tool to empathize during human-centered [liberatory design](#), continuous improvement and other similar processes. Purposeful, focused questions can help program designers, educators and community leaders understand perspectives by drawing out insightful stories.

Intimately understanding the experiences of students, families and community members will lead to stronger community-driven educational programming and services. Among other outcomes, interviews might discover student or community needs that demand attention, help educators learn about root causes of problems, and surface community priorities.

Who should conduct empathy interviews?

Those most comfortable connecting with families should conduct empathy interviews. District office staff, community liaisons, community engagement team members and teachers are all likely candidates. When possible, consider an interviewer who already has a trusting relationship with an interviewee.

Consider the following as you put your interview team together.

Inviting community ownership: As your district strives to move along ODE's community engagement spectrum toward community ownership in design processes, consider partnering with students, parents, community-based organizations, and others to collect

qualitative data through empathy interviews

Compensation and incentives: If someone is going above and beyond their typical role, consider ways you can express gratitude. Based on what your district policy will allow, try offering incentives such as gas or grocery cards to community partners, extra duty to staff, or other forms of appreciation.

Language access: If possible, the interviewer and notetaker should speak the same language as the person being interviewed. It can be challenging to have an honest and intimate conversation through interpretation. When that is not an option, follow the tips on page 5 to ensure successful interpretation.

Note Taking: Consider assigning a notetaker who can accompany the interviewer, while being mindful of potential power dynamics. Accurate notes can mitigate against an interviewer's biased memory.

The interviewer can also use an audio recorder, such as Otter, to automatically transcribe the interview. This strategy can be helpful to alleviate a power imbalance caused by multiple interviewers. Be sure to explain the purpose and obtain consent before recording.

Interviewer competencies: Interview teams should be trained and have opportunities to practice, connect and reflect with each other before, during and after the process. They should be skilled at navigating cultural and racial nuance, listening, noticing nonverbal cues, and shifting strategies in the moment based on social awareness.

Steps to Getting Started



Plan and Prepare

Complete this planner before the interview(s)

1. Select who you will interview and where you will interview them. Review the focal student groups (page 18), [your community asset map](#), and any existing data that might inform who you need to hear from most. Try identifying students and families on extreme ends of the user experience continuum, like families new to a district and families with a long history in the district.

Get creative about how you approach interview candidates. Hang out in a space you are reimagining or designing for and talk to users (e.g. school library, STEM lab or makerspace, athletic facilities, etc.). You can also organize a canvass or phone bank.

2. Review your talking points and select interview questions. You will need to first build trust and rapport before diving into potentially personal questions. An empathy interview is intended to elicit stories and emotions. You won't want to rush through a long list of questions, so select around four to eight. Know that it's okay to not address all of the questions you selected if you're able to go deep on just a few. When selecting questions, be mindful of your objectives. You might have goals around learning possible root causes of poor student achievement data, gaining insights into survey data from your students or school community, or better understanding what's driving the success of an exceptional program. See page 10 for question ideas that align to ODE's Integrated Guidance needs assessment.

3. Have a plan for intense experiences or triggers. Set expectations that every question is optional and that anyone can stop the interview at any time.

Surfacing personal stories can trigger emotions for the interviewer or interviewee. Pay attention to non-verbal cues. Do not force a story. After the interview, engagement team members can be prepared to connect the interviewer to the appropriate person for support if necessary.

4. Be ready to sort through the data and follow up: Within 24 hours, follow up with a thank you and any incentives you are offering interviewees who take the time to talk to you. Know where you will deposit the data (e.g. a shared Google folder or drive) so your district's community engagement team is prepared to incorporate the information into a needs assessment. Although it often will not be appropriate, consider culminating the interview with a ThoughtExchange question to help your district's engagement team find more ways to encapsulate and synthesize communities' perspectives (email communications@nwresd.k12.or.us to set this up). Once you learn more about how interviews have shaped school district plans, inform interview participants. Consider adding a reminder to your calendar to follow up with your district's draft Integrated Plan once it is available.

Fill out your own planner and facilitator's guide!

Customize templates at nwresd.org/empathy-interviews or scan the QR code.



Success on the Day Of

Use this sample facilitator's guide for each interview

1. Build relational trust and set a tone for non-judgemental listening: Introduce yourself, the notetaker, and the reason you're interviewing, e.g. "I am volunteering with the school district to speak with community members. We want to know more about your experience as a student who [insert focal student population]. Do you have a few minutes to talk?"

Start with basic questions as you build trust (How are you doing?" or "Why are you here today?"). Be affirming as the conversation progresses.

2. Interview and probe: Ask the questions you brainstormed. At the same time, look for opportunities to probe: "Why do you say that?" "Tell me more..." "What were you feeling at that point?" Practice pausing, reflecting and inquiring further.

In addition to transcribing the conversation, your notetaker will observe nonverbal cues. They might be able to jump in and inquire about contradictions or other things they notice. Sometimes what people say and what they do (or say later after the interview is "complete") are different. Gracefully probe these contradictions and other behaviors you notice.

3. After the interview: Let the community engagement team or your liaison know that you've submitted interview notes, including relevant demographic information. Don't forget to thank your interviewee for their time! Consider adding a reminder to your calendar to follow up with the interviewee once you've learned how their input will be used.

Look out! Have these tips handy for a better interview.



Embrace silence: Often if you allow silence, a person will reflect on what they've just said and go deeper. It's especially important to be mindful and appreciative of this during virtual interviews where pauses can feel even more uncomfortable.

Don't suggest answers: Even if they pause before answering, don't help them by suggesting an answer. This can unintentionally get people to say things that agree with your expectations. Ask questions neutrally.

Notetaker tips: Highlight any action or follow-up that might need to take place afterward, like a question you couldn't answer. In addition to transcribing, pay attention to nonverbal cues. This is especially important if you are interviewing in the same space you are designing for. Observe interviewees before and after the interview to look for insights and contradictions.

Sample Questions

The following questions are aligned to the Integrated Guidance needs assessment that community engagement teams will complete. Select the questions that make the most sense for where you are in your planning process. For instance, if you already have good community survey data or student achievement data that highlights your strengths and weaknesses, consider focusing on those areas so you can learn why certain strategies are working and others are not.

Questions should be open-ended and framed in a way that will elicit stories, emotions and feelings.

Students

- Tell me about a positive experience you’ve had in our district.
- Tell me about a time someone at school made you feel welcomed and like you belonged. (Probe: What did they do? How did that feel? Why did you feel that way?)
- Tell me about a time you felt excluded, or like you didn’t belong. Why do you think you felt that way?
- Tell me about one of your favorite lessons, projects or assignments. What made it interesting to you? (Probe: How did it make you feel? Why?)
- Tell me about one of your least favorite lessons, projects or assignments. (Probe: How did it make you feel? Why?)
- Tell me about a time you felt overwhelmed or frustrated. What did you do? Was there someone you could talk to about your feelings?
- Can you tell me about opportunities you have had at school to learn about different jobs and careers? What did it feel like to learn about those career options?

Parents and families

- What does it feel like when you visit your child’s school? (Probe: Why does it feel that way?)
- Describe a teacher or staff member who did a great job connecting to your child. What did that look like?
- What are the best/worst parts about communicating with your child’s teacher or school? (Probe: What does that feel like?)
- Tell me about a time when your child was highly engaged in an academic assignment. What do you think made it interesting?
- Have you ever had to discuss your child’s behavior with school staff? What did that feel like?

Educators

- Tell me about a time you felt like you were truly making a difference for your students. (Probe: Why did you feel that way? What was that like?)
- Tell me about a time you saw a typically reserved student absorbed in a lesson or assignment. What did you notice?

General community

- Tell me about the last time you were in a school or district facility? What did that feel like?
- Tell me about your most memorable experience with a school district employee. What happened?



Tie Interview Data to Integrated Plans

Understand your data using the Street Data Analysis Protocol

Time: Minimum 45 minutes to an hour. **Roles:** Facilitator (who sometimes participates, depending on the size of the group); Data gatherers (whose data is being analyzed by the group); Thought partners. **Preparation:** If needed, have copies of the data available, plus highlighters and scissors. Consider having participants review the data in advance to expedite the observe step. **CAUTION:** Your review team should include diverse contributors, especially from the communities you are engaging. Different protocols carry different benefits and risks. Review more options along with the pros and cons of each protocol at nwresd.org/community-partnership-data.

Time	Protocol steps	Facilitator tip
10 minutes	Connect: What was the process of gathering the street data like for you? What do you predict the data may reveal?	Frame as an opportunity to practice vulnerability. Go first to model vulnerability.
15 minutes	Observe: What are we hearing from our community? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Read through the data with a highlighter. Look for patterns (repeating words or narratives).• Consider having folks first work in pairs with scissors to cut and cluster the data into themes.• Reflect as a group: What stands out from the data?	Frame the importance of staying low-inference. Provide an example of low versus high-inference. <i>Low-inference:</i> “Four of the five students we spoke with said they feel afraid to raise their hands and speak in class.” <i>High-inference:</i> “Most of the students feel uncomfortable in their classes.”
20 minutes	Interpret: What does this data reveal about the experiences of our most vulnerable community members? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ask them to try to name the patterns/themes in three words or less, using sticky notes.• If more than three or four themes emerge, ask the group: Which theme/pattern feels most important and why?	Use a poster, whiteboard or shared digital document to track the group’s discussion.
5 minutes	Feel: What feelings does this data evoke for you? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Encourage folks to sit with their feelings, taking a few deep breaths and noticing sensations in the body.• Use a listening dyad again or a community circle to allow people to share uninterrupted.	Ask people to resist the tendency to self-anesthetize in the face of discomfort or pain.
10 minutes	Reflect/consider (possible questions): What matters about this data? How does it (or doesn’t it) stand up to our own vision? Where is our greatest opportunity? What will help us learn more? What will help us move toward the pedagogy of voice? What steps or actions might come next?	Offer possibilities for next steps — for example, another round of data-gathering; a team focus group with some of the students; an invitation to the students to meet and brainstorm approaches to the issues at play.



Section 2:

Story Circles



Why and When to Use This Strategy

Make meaningful progress toward your Integrated Plan

What is a story circle?

A story circle is a small group of individuals in a circle, sharing stories — usually from their own experiences or imagination — focusing on a common theme. As each person, in turn, shares a story, a richer and more complex story evolves. Story circles build perspective, empathy, cultural humility, listening, courage, vulnerability, and healing.

Importantly, collecting many stories eliminates the risk of relying on a single narrative and builds awareness and understanding between community members. Each person shares their own personal experiences. These experiences form who we are, how we relate to others, and how we navigate the world. Sharing stories strengthens relationships that value human connectedness, demonstrates that meaningful relationships are intimately tied to success, and creates school communities where people feel known and cared for.

Why use story circles?

Story circles are an engagement and leadership development process in which each participant listens to and shares authentic stories. The process provides a comfortable, welcoming setting for participants to share experiences, learn from and encourage one another, build relationships and solve problems.

Story circles create meaningful community among educators and families. This approach to community engagement focuses on the powerful — often healing — impact that storytelling has in relationship building. It can be a very effective communication tool, leading to stronger classrooms, schools and communities.

Preparing to Facilitate a Story Circle

Format and guidelines

Facilitators must ensure everyone feels comfortable participating, that everyone gets equal attention to their story, and that everyone gets time to share. Consider a rehearsal prior to the main event.

Flow: Story circles start with a check-in, followed by equal time for each participant to respond to the prompt — usually two to four minutes. Large groups will break into smaller groups for the storytelling portion then reconvene for a check-out at the end.

Check-in/check-out: The check-in allows the facilitator to state the reason for gathering, welcome everyone into the space and help attendees let go of outside distraction. Establish comfort and build trust with a simple, relaxed question before going deeper. The check-out allows for some synthesis and organized closure to the event. Participants can share how they are feeling or voice their commitment for moving forward with the gathering's purpose in mind.

Setting expectations: A story has a beginning, a middle and an end. It's not time to perform, or offer opinions or commentary, but to share something you experienced or observed. Listening is as important as speaking. Each person receives full attention while telling their story. Listen for the essence of what's shared, however the storyteller wants to tell it.

Location: Facilitate a story circle in a home, classroom, within a town hall or at a community center. Zoom can convene a group that otherwise faces barriers to attending in-person events. If you're convening a larger group in Zoom, use the breakout room feature to create circles of four to six people.

Invite List: Story circles can be intimate or have up to 20 to 25 participants. If you host a group larger than 25, break into smaller groups for storytelling. Reference the focal student groups (page 18) and your [community asset map](#) when brainstorming your invite list and stated purpose for gathering. Demonstrate compassion and genuine curiosity in listening to the stories of those invited, especially for those who have never shared in a format similar to this one.

Data collection: Story circles are intimate and often include healing as an intended outcome. Data collection isn't the core goal of this engagement strategy, but there are a few ways to consider synthesizing what you learn in this community setting. During the check-out, use chart paper, the sign-in sheet or ThoughtExchange to take down information. Some example prompts toward this end could be:

- What would make you feel more welcome at your child's school? (parents)
- In your opinion, what would educational success look like for your child? (parents)
- Who do you feel most connected with at school? Why? (students)
- What's most important for you to get from your school experience? (students)
- What would you like your role to be in the public school system? (community partner)

Be explicit about what information will and will not be shared with district planning teams. The facilitator can then share what they learned during a needs assessment or data analysis session, such as the one outlined on page 11.

Select a story prompt

- Share a story about an experience that made you smile, such as a connection made, moment of pride or moment of joy.
- Share a story about a time you felt a sense of belonging—or the opposite—to this nation.
- Share a story about an element or object that grounds you (e.g. ocean, touchstone, etc.).
- Share a story about a mentor or ancestor who taught you something important.
- Share a story about someone treating you differently because of who you are.
- Share a story about a time when you experienced despair and then hope.
- Share a story about familial migration.
- Share a story about a moment of growth.

Agenda and Facilitator's Guide

Make your own agenda!

Find more story prompts and customize materials at nwresd.org/story-circles or scan the QR code.



After reading about the format and facilitator guidelines, build your agenda for the day.

Open (5 minutes): Set expectations. Be explicit about what information will be kept confidential and what information could inform school district plans (story circle time vs. check-out).

Introductions and check-in (20 minutes): Name, pronouns, who you represent, check-in question. For the largest groups, split into smaller groups before doing the check-in.

Story circle (20-40 minutes): Pose the prompt and reiterate from the opening expectations what makes a story. Split into groups as needed to allow everyone time to listen and share. Set up a signal to let participants know when it is time to transition to someone else. Hand out the talking piece to the first storyteller.

Check-out (10-30 minutes): If applicable, reassemble into the full group. For the largest groups, you might need to remain in breakouts. "After today I feel more ____," "After today I'm inspired to ____." Alternatively, synthesize the collective narrative through data collection using chart paper, taking notes on the sign-in sheet or by using ThoughtExchange.

Packing list

Talking piece: A talking piece is an object that is passed around the story circle to indicate whose opportunity it is to speak. You can pack anything you like as a talking piece, including something that holds value and symbolism for the event and its attendees. Some ideas include: a small art piece such as a painted rock, shells or other items of environmental significance, a children's toy, instructional tools, etc.

Sign-in sheet with a check-out prompt

Chart paper and pens

Community guidelines

Consider establishing group norms for participants to ensure everyone is comfortable with the shared space.

- To be heard you need to be a good listener.
- Be okay with non-closure.
- Be willing to be vulnerable. That's why you've chosen to be in this space.
- Take space, make space (and step out if you need to take care of yourself).
- What's shared here, stays here (unless explicitly stated otherwise).
- This work is a process, not an event.
- Get comfortable with being uncomfortable.
- Affirm self-care. Do what feels right for you.

Section 3:

More Engagement Strategies



Field organizers developed and used the following strategies while working with low-income families, immigrants and refugees, and culturally specific communities. Consider adding these to your overall engagement strategy.

Peer-to-peer networks and affinity groups

In peer-to-peer networks and affinity groups, families gather with those who share a common identity (e.g. Black families, migrant families, special education parents/caregivers, etc.). Members have the opportunity to discuss their individual experiences with peers. The space, whether regularly convened or occurring as a one-off, can offer a sense of belonging, a shift in power and an opportunity for renewal and healing. Your group should create norms, goals and values so members understand what to expect and how to participate.

Parent learning walks

Parent learning walks foster meaningful relationships between teachers and parents, especially in order to support student learning at home. This strategy exposes parents to classroom experiences so they better understand how to navigate the educational system, address possible barriers their child might face and extend learning outside of the classroom.

Sample objectives and benefits:

- Identify how to connect teachers and parents in the classrooms to benefit the school community.
- Offer parents specific ways to join in collaborative planning and learning. Be mindful of cultural

differences and language needs.

- Provide a transformative experience where classrooms become true learning communities (parent, student, teacher, community members engage in lessons).
- Give educators and parents a chance to reflect on highlights of lesson while providing authentic feedback
- Allow parents to observe learning targets and familiarize themselves with standards that are prerequisites for graduation.

Get started by [customizing the form that parents can use for notetaking and reflection during a parent learning walk](#).

Further Reading, Resources & Links

If you’re viewing a print version of this publication, visit nwresd.org/toolkit to access links.

Language access

Local interpreters and translators:

- [NWRESD interpretation and translation \(Spanish language\)](#)
- [IRCO International Language Bank](#)
- [Linguava](#)
- [Passport to Languages](#)
- [Access Services Northwest \(ASL Interpreters\)](#)
 - ◊ [NWRESD also has limited availability to conduct ASL interpretation](#)

Additional language resources:

- [A Guide for Engaging ELL Families: Twenty Strategies for School Leaders](#)
- [AFT Toolkit for Teachers: Reaching Out to Hispanic Parents of English Language Learners](#)
- [Equity through Language Access: Best Practices for Collaborating with Interpreters](#)
- [Framework of Six Types of Involvement](#)
- [Exploring cultural humility: Insights for communicating effectively with multicultural families](#) (Presentation by Carlos Tenorio Hughes and Adriana Carolina Parente, NWRESD Interpreters and Translators)

Empathy interviews

- [Customizable NWRESD toolkit templates located at \[nwresd.org/empathy-interviews\]\(https://nwresd.org/empathy-interviews\)](#)
- [Empathy Interviews by Kari Nelsestuen and Julie Smith](#) (Requires Learning Forward Membership)

Story circles

- [Customizable NWRESD toolkit templates located at \[nwresd.org/story-circles\]\(https://nwresd.org/story-circles\)](#)
- [Story Circle Stories: Featuring stories of convening in circle from 32 diverse voices and visual artists](#)
- [Story Circles Toolkit from Oregon State University's Student Affairs office](#)

Data

- [Data Dashboard for Oregon Schools](#) (includes publicly available student achievement data by district, federal program demographics, Career Technical Education (CTE) participation, and labor and industries employment projections)

Community Surveys

- [English community survey for paper and print](#)
- [Spanish community survey for paper and print](#)
- [English community survey online](#)
- [Spanish community survey online](#)

Demographic questions for community events

- [English Demographic Collection Card](#)
- [Spanish Demographic Collection Card](#)
- [Google form for recording demographic information](#)

Data review protocols and processing

- [Street Data Review Protocol for qualitative data](#)
- [Atlas Data Review Protocol for quantitative data](#)
- [How to Process Qualitative Survey Data](#)

List of focal student groups

- Students experiencing poverty
- Students of color
- Students with disabilities
- Students who are emerging bilinguals
- Students experiencing homelessness
- Students experiencing foster care
- LGBTQ2SIA+ students
- Students recently arrived
- Migrant students
- Students with experience of incarceration or detention



Northwest Regional
Education Service District

First Edition: This is the first edition of a continuous improvement effort. For a dynamic version of this toolkit visit nwresd.org/toolkit. We welcome your suggestions for improvements at communications@nwresd.k12.or.us.